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ABSTRACT

Much of the current research on children's memory comes from a Vygotskian perspective, focusing on context and social environment, and from a Piagetian perspective, emphasizing the importance of family lore and belief systems in shaping children's memory. Recent studies suggest that young children's representational abilities are continuous with adults' representational and memory capabilities. Current studies have identified three kinds of memories exhibited by young children: (1) general event representation; (2) episodic memory; and (3) autobiographical memory. Recognizing the importance of social interaction and social context in the development of memory, one teacher explored the development of self-reflective talk and memories in a classroom of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds. The teacher initiated an ongoing curriculum around memories and babyhood through periodic classroom memory-related discussions, stories, and projects, and recorded group and individual discussions as well as spontaneous episodes of memory talk. The goal of these activities was to help children distinguish between their past as babies and their rapidly increasing maturity as preschoolers through talking about the past. Observations indicate that young children usually recount episodes from their past to adults rather than to their peers, reflecting the findings of studies that suggest memory retrieval in young children requires a cue--often adult-initiated conversations. Over the year, children in the class learned much about how to remember and talk about the past. Children began to initiate remembering discussions independently, indicating their increasing abilities to internalize past experiences in language and memory. Remembering also became a mode through which the children in the class could find solidarity. The task of remembering and thinking about the past appears to be one way in which preschool children can develop a clearer sense of self as they continue to grow and have new experiences in the world. (Contains 18 references.) (KDFB)

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WHEN I WAS A BABY

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TALK IN A PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

BY JULIET BROMER

1995

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Young children enjoy talking about themselves and their experiences in the world. As a teacher of three- and four-year-olds, I became interested in the development of self-reflective talk and memories in the preschool classroom. Preschoolers who were so recently babies themselves, love to talk about their past as a baby. Talking to children about when they were babies helps them to redirect some of the silliness of baby talk so common in preschool classrooms into serious self reflection. For three- and four-year-olds, remembering and telling about the past helps them to make clear distinctions between the past and the present. Talking about the past through sharing personal stories helps young children begin to construct a self identity, despite their own rapid development during these preschool years and changes in the world around them.

In this article I intend to describe some of the memory-related activities which children in my classroom explored as well as some of the ways in which talking about the past can help preschoolers develop self esteem and a positive self identity. In my own preschool classroom of three-, four-, and five-year-olds, I had observed that talk about babies was one of the most popular discussions and topics for dramatic play in my classroom. Building on this natural interest of the children, I initiated an ongoing curriculum around memories and babyhood through periodic classroom discussions, stories, and projects. I introduced memory-related activities and recorded group and individual discussions as well as spontaneous episodes of memory talk. My goal was to help the children distinguish between their past as a baby and their rapidly increasing maturity as a preschooler through talking about the past.

In our many group discussions about memories, I often used the word "remember" to begin a discussion. While children responded with a wealth of remembered stories, I began to wonder what these young preschoolers understood as the meaning of the word remember and how much impact a teacher's language can have on children's developing sense of narrative and memory. When asked it means to remember, a four-year-old boy responded " your mom tells you because you didn't know anything, 'cause you didn't know that you were a baby when you were a baby" This child's description of remembering suggests the importance of social interaction and social context in the development of memory.

The earliest verbal interactions are most often between mother and child, and much talk between mothers and their young children is about the past. Many studies in which mothers were asked to keep diaries of their infant's memory tasks show that verbal social interactions between mothers and infants helped to model an awareness of remembering for the very young child (Ashmead & Perlmutter 1980; Ratner, 1980; Miller & Sperry, 1987). Ratner (1980) suggests that children learned the meaning of remember from their mother's use of the word "remember," rather than from being told or asked to remember (p.62). In another study, Hudson (1990) finds that children recall different details than adults do for shared experiences, indicating that children learn from adults "how to remember, that is about how to participate, and finally, to initiate conversations about the past rather than rehearsing specific content" (p.183).

The wealth of responses from my preschoolers about remembering and memories, also indicates that a teacher's focus and talk around remembering can help children to learn to talk about the past. Often, on Monday mornings, I encouraged the children to talk about something they did on the weekend,

although depending on the way I asked this question, I received different responses. When the question "What did you do on the weekend?" ellicited a chorus of "I forget," I realized that I needed to rephrase the way I was asking this question. My goal was to foster talking about the past in general, so on subsequent Mondays, I asked children to tell about something special that happened to them when they were not in school. Other times, I started the discussion with my own personal memory of a special event. At these times due to my rephrasing of a question or modeling of a memory story, every child had something to contribute to the discussion, whether it was a different version of my story or a child's own personal memory.

A wealth of literature focusing on young children's memory and recall abilities has emerged in the last decade. Much of this current research grows out of a Vygotskian perspective which focuses on context and social environment as factors in cognitive development. One cannot look at these new studies, however, without considering Jean Piaget's view of memory development in young children. Piaget indicates that young children's memories for events develop with the emergence of language abilities. Prior to age three, children's memories are unorganized and chaotic, reflecting a lack of language sophistication (Piaget, 1962, p.187) .These early memories emerge as representations of the past, rather than as actual knowledge about that past for the preschool-aged child. According to Piaget, the preschooler "reconstitutes the past as a function of the present..." offering a "present notion of the past, not his direct knowledge of that past" (Bringuier & Piaget, 1980, p.122).

As pre-school children gain more sophisticated language abilities, their memories become rich in verbal detail, yet are still not faithful to the past and

are often based in the reality of present beliefs told to them by adults. Piaget illustrates this kind of reconstituted memory through a personal account of his own childhood memory in which a man tries to kidnap him at age two when he was out for a walk with his nurse. Many years later his nurse confesses that this event never occurred, and that she had falsely invented it and told the story to him and his parents in order to maintain her position (Bringuier & Piaget). Piaget suggests the importance of family lore and belief systems in shaping the young child's memory development. Despite this acknowledgement of the social context as an influence on children's memory development, Piaget was primarily interested in individual cognitive development and tangentially interested in the role of social context and environment in that process.

Earlier theorists focused mostly on adult memory and the phenomenon of childhood amnesia in which adults do not retain memories from experiences and events before age five. The commonly held Freudian belief explained this loss of memory as due to repression of unpleasant thoughts and regressive events of those early years. Ernest Schactel (1959) departs from this view, suggesting that adults do not retain memories from early childhood due to tremendous structural changes in language and thought. He argues that the symbolic pre-verbal systems which young children have to process experience are no longer present in adulthood, thus preventing adults from accessing those earliest experiences (p. 285). Furthermore, Schactel depicts adult memory as a familiarized and bland representation of the past, without the vibrancy and wonderment of childhood experience. He argues that adult memories for the distant past become conventionalized or generalized representations of that past: "Adult

memory reflects life as a road with occasional signposts and milestones rather than as the landscape through which this road has led" (1959, p. 287).

While current research has not answered the question of childhood amnesia, it has expanded the study of memory to preschool-aged children. Challenging the structuralist views of Schactel, researchers have revealed that children's symbolic systems for remembering events are not so radically different from adult systems of memory, and that young children possess the seeds of sophisticated cognitive organization (Fivush & Hamond, 1990; Nelson, 1992, 1993). This recent shift in studies on children's memories, is evident in the emergence of naturalistic research in which children are observed in classrooms, child care centers, and at home where social interactions and environmental context are natural and familiar. Moving away from Piaget's focus on the individual, current research looks at the social context of children's interactions as central in the development of memory abilities (Ashmead & Perlmutter, 1980; Hudson, 1990; Nelson, 1989).

Research on memory development, indicates that young children's representational abilities, although basic, are essentially continuous with adult's representational amd memory capabilities (Nelson 1992). With the emergence of language in the preschool years, three- and four-year-olds start to be able to distinguish between the past and the present, signifying the beginnings of early memory recall. Furthermore, some researchers have found that with the assistance of adult modeling, rehearsal of events, and dramatic re-enactment, children can represent the past with specific detail (Fivush & Hamond, 1990). Current studies have identified three different kinds of memories which young children exhibit:

General Event Representation (GER): Preschoolers' memories of past events often lack details and instead offer a general rendition of the past. Usuallly, GERs or "scripts" are memories or accounts of past familiar events in which the details of the specific event are absorbed by the child's general knowlege of that experience, and are translated into a general, more abstract version. Thus, when a three or four-year-old child is asked what happens at a birthday party, he answers with the general: "you go there, you eat, and you go home" (Nelson & Ross,1980, p.97).

Episodic Memory: Often emerging after the ability to generalize events, episodic memories are intact and specific accounts of the past which have not been absorbed by a GER. These detailed memories of the past often depict novel or unusual events (Hudson,1986; Nelson & Ross, 1980). These kinds of memories are often ellicited when children are allowed to recall any past event of their own choosing (Hudson, 1986, p.111).

Autobiographical Memory: Similar to episodic memory, autobiographical memory emerges approximately at age four (Nelson, 1990, 1993). Such memories may be retained over a lifetime or over some period of time. While episodic memories may recall any past event in detail such as a thunder storm or moving to new house, autobiographical memories detail a more personal past experience about a person's own actions, feelings, and sense of self in the world.

The discussion of general event memories in the current literature recalls Schactel's descriptions of adult memories as "signposts", an apt metaphor for the conventionalization of memory. Recent research, however,

indicates the appearance of this kind of generalized memory ability in young children as well as in adults. Like Schactel's description of adult memory, current research does not indicate that young children's memories are necessarily faithful to the reality of past events. Just as Piaget depicted early memory talk as being reconstituted from present events and knowledge, so current researchers also describe much of memory talk as script-like: "[T]here appears to be a kind of dominance of the general in young children's memories" (Nelson & Ross, 1980, p.96).

Despite historical continuities in the descriptions of children's memories, current studies depart from Piaget in the central role which they give to the learning environment in the development of language and memory ability. Through "naturalistic" data collection methods such as mothers' diaries of their children's actions, or teachers' written records in a preschool setting, these studies have revealed much in the realm of young children's memory development (Miller & Sperry, 1987; Hudson, 1990). The emphasis on social context, however, is not a new idea. In his discussion of spoken language, Kornei Chukovsky (1963) suggests that "[t]he young child acquires his linguistic and thinking habits only through communication with other human beings. It is only this association that makes a human being out of him, that is, a speaking and thinking being" (p. 9). Vygotsky also focuses his theory of child development in the recognition of a direct link between children's learning and their social engagements in the external world. Social interactions serve as scaffolds for children's cognitive advancements: "[H]uman learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88).

Once children in my classroom began to talk about the past, I found their stories to be either examples of generalized knowledge about the past or specific accounts of a personal past. Such responses as "When I was a baby I cried in the night time," or "When I was a baby I drank from a bottle" offer a general account of and knowledge of babyhood. Having a general knowledge and image of one's baby years to compare with the present seems particularly important for preschoolers as they gain independence and increasing contol over their world in both the physical and verbal realms. Even these impersonal script-like descriptions of the past hold a personal significance for the child's developing self concept. By comparing her present self to a baby who cannot talk at all, even a three-year-old can gain self esteem in realizing her present maturity. Just as the toddler gains increasing awareness and control over his environment with the achievement of object permanence, so the preschool child gains increasing awareness of himself with the ability to hold simultaneously an image of his past self with an image of his present self. Once these memories are recited and acknowledged by the child, they become, in a sense, available to him when needed.

Other children when asked "What happened when you were a baby?" responded with specific episodes full of autobiographical memories. I found that many of these stories focused around past toileting episodes. One day a child brought in a well-known book called *Once Upon a Potty* about a young child's adventures with toileting, and asked if I would read it to the whole class for story time. The book is clearly intended for children who are just being toilet trained, while most of my preschoolers had gone through this process a year ago. I decided to read it at story time, expecting much giggling and silliness. To my surprise, the children listened with great attention and were eager to tell about their own, often poignant experiences with toileting

which play such a significant role in their developing maturity. One child told of an embarrasing toileting incident in such detail, it seemed that through words, she was able to diffuse the emotion of the event. Language and memory, in a sense, come to serve as coping mechanisms for the child and as ways to find solace and comfort in the present. Bruner discusses the possible functions of expressive language for young children: "For language, it seems, helps to 'cool' or reduce some of the uncertainty and emotionality in the child's world just by its displaced mode of representing that world in memory and thought" (Bruner, 1989, p.76).

In my observations, I found that young children usually recount episodes from their past to adults rather than to their peers. Although other children may become part of a child's dialogue, young children's reminiscences more often tend to be directed towards an adult in a one-on-one conversation. The importance of the adult both as listener and as a source of encouragement for children to talk about the past seems significant. Nelson and Ross (1980) found in their study of memory development in infants and children that in the majority of instances, "memories are not retrieved by young children in the absence of an external cue" (p. 99). For preschool-aged children, adult-initiated conversations and language as well as external props become cues for children to talk about the past.

In a preschool classroom, an array of potential cues, both teacher-directed and spontaneous, can serve as catalysts for memory talk. Photographs, dramatic play, dress-up props, books, as well as a teacher's own personal stories can all encourage memory talk and autobiographical reflection in preschoolers. Building on the children's interests in babyhood, I asked my preschoolers to bring in photographs of themselves as babies. These photographs served as cues for children to reflect on past episodes and on

their own identity over time. Writing down children's memories of babyhood also helped children to make a distinction between the past and present. Recording such memories may also help to retain these memories over time, although research has not yet shown if these influences of school, written dictations, or rehearsal of memories, lead to increased retention over time. Certainly, focusing young children's attention on remembering, may help them to review important events and experiences, an important cognitive and daily living skill.

Most studies of young children's memory development focus on the verbal interactions between mothers and children at home (Hudson, 1990). The school setting, however, provides an additional layer of social context in memory development. In a group setting, some peers model the narrative structure for remembering the past and seem to influence the storytelling competency of the class as a whole. Moreover, in a mixed age setting where older children have developed more sophisticated narratives about the past than their younger peers, the influence of peer interactions becomes as important as the influence of adult modeling. One of my goals throughout the year was to emphasize the importance of sharing stories and listening to one's peers at group time. As the children became accustomed to having group discussions about babyhood, I noticed that each child served as an impetus for the next child to share her own narrative about her past.

By showing children that remembering is a valued topic for discussion and reflection, a teacher can create a narrative environment in which children feel comfortable sharing stories from their personal past. By telling these stories to their peers, the children become part of a sharing community of storytellers. Nelson (1993) comments on this function of memories: "they are shareable with others and thus serve a social solidarity function... this

social function of memory underlies all of our storytelling, history-making narrative activities, and ultimately all of our accumulated knowledge systems" (p.12). Over the course of the year, children in my class learned much about how to remember and talk about the past from our many class discussions. Children began to initiate remembering discussions independently, indicating their increasing abilities to internalize past experiences in language and memory. Remembering became a mode through which the children in my class could find solidarity and togetherness. All children have something to say about when they were a baby, and this kind of talk helps to unite a class in which sharing and listening are valued. Furthermore, the task of remembering and thinking about the past is one way in which preschool-aged children can develop a clearer sense of self and self-identity, as they continue to grow and have new experiences in the world.

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